



Boredom to Death and Terrible Fascination: A Study of Socio-psychological Limitations of Henrik Ibsen's Characters in *Hedda Gabler* and *The Lady from the Sea*

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the socio-psychological limitations of Henrik Ibsen's characters concerning their social conditions and mental suffering. Their resultant extreme deviant behaviours are analyzed with textual references in the plays *Hedda Gabler* and *The Lady from the Sea*. Most attempts concentrate on how their past life and present psychological suffering constrain and limit their behavioural options and have devastating effects on their social conditions. The paper explores that Ibsen's characters Hedda Gabler and Ellida Wangel are constrained by their past, who cannot adapt themselves psychologically to their present social environment. In this context, a comprehensive approach to their suffering is not restricted to the past only; the characters' present social condition and psychological constraints are also examined. Limitations in their psychological adaptability to domestic and social conditions are delineated by the consequent desperation, and deviant behaviour of these characters, which bring them to the status of 'nonbeing' (meaningless existence) and ultimate recourse to suicide. This status of 'nonbeing' drives them to drastic and desperate actions. This study is a literary research based on textual analysis of primary (text of the plays) and secondary (criticism of the plays) sources, using close reading analytical research design.

Keywords: Socio-psychological, Limitations, Social condition, Past and present, Nonbeing

1. Introduction

The study of the human mind, and mental processes, especially concerning human behavior is termed psychology. The term psychological is related to the mental and emotional processes of an individual's reaction to a particular social and biological condition. In the psychological sphere, this paper concentrates on the pathogenic aspects of psychology. Psychopathology is a term which refers to either the study of [mental illness](#) or mental distress or the manifestation of behaviours and experiences which may be indicative of mental illness or psychological [impairment](#), such as abnormal, maladaptive behaviour or mental activity (Wikipedia). Psychopathology is exclusively aimed at studying extreme emotional states, and disturbances, that result in extreme behaviourist and psychological disorders classified as psychosis and neurosis. Leo Willerman relates psychopathology to what he calls "deviant" behaviour. He writes:

Psychopathology is not to be equated with deviance although all individual with psychopathology can be regarded as deviant. Those forms of deviance which often involve superior personal or social

adaptation, such as high intelligence are not to be regarded as psychopathological; only those whose behaviour is deviant and maladaptive are viewed as having psychopathology. (241)

This paper focuses on the psychopathological limitations of Henrik Ibsen's characters concerning their social and biological conditions. Limitations in their psychological adaptability to their domestic and social conditions are explored in connection with the consequent desperation, deviant behavior and recourse to suicide by the characters. Focus is on the plays *Hedda Gabler* (1890), and *The Lady from the Sea* (1888).

In these plays Ibsen's emphasis, moreover, is on psychic rather than social analysis. The central characters both Hedda in *Hedda Gabler* and Ellida Wangel in *The Lady from the Sea* are psychologically preoccupied with their past life and find no comfort and freedom of mind in the present. Both are suffering from psychological limitations though in a different way. Their mental illness and anguish are analyzed and concentration is on finding several obvious resemblances and differences between Hedda Gabler and Ellida Wangel in terms of their sufferings. In both the plays the old favourite problem of Ibsen, the marriage question as in *Ghosts* and *A Doll's House*, is stirred up again. The message these plays communicate is one of extreme psychological distress, terror, ennui, ambivalence and an all-embracing disgust with self and with others. *Hedda Gabler* is a play about the formerly aristocratic Hedda's limitation to adapt herself psychologically to the bourgeois life into which she has married. Though she has married Jorgen Tesman, a scholar engaged in research in the history of civilization, she has not accepted this marriage mentally. Physically she lives in Jorgen Tesman's house but mentally she is entrapped by her past life. Similarly, Ellida Wangel is a young woman like Hedda but from a poor family, and she has married the fifty-eight-year-old Dr. Wangel from an upper class. Her fault is that she has been untrue to herself by contracting a marriage based on reason, and is now full of aimless and wild yearnings. She has come from the sea, where she lived with her father a Parson in a lighthouse. As she has grown up out there by the free, open sea; its romantic lure exerts a strange power over her imagination. "She has lived the very life of the sea;" Edmund Goss observes, "her bloods has tides in it, is subject to ebb and flow. She has been transplanted too late from her ocean rock; she pines like a sea-weed in a tank or a petrel in a cage" (92). Thus life on the earth, dry land offers her no charm and attraction. The dangers and mysteries of the unknown sea, the far-away, haunt her adventurous spirit.

Hedda and Ellida has no appreciation for the blessings of a home and no understanding of her appointed duties in it. "She has no responsibility," George Bernard Shaw accordingly points out, "no care and no trouble. In other words, she is an idle, helpless utterly dependent article of luxury. . . . The lady from the sea feels an indefinite want in her life." (105-6).

Hedda Gabler appears to be a lady unable to accept mentally the limiting codes of behaviour of the middle-class woman during that time. Mentally, she is not capable of solving the dilemma, of belonging both to the old aristocratic class and to the new middle-class life, and she is torn apart. "Thus", according to Errol Durbach, "Hedda is trapped in a truly tragic dilemma" because "her upbringing and society have forced her (to be the dutiful and middle-class housewife and mother-to-be) and her inability to do so because of the strength of her conditioning and the pressure of public opinion" (79). The like of her is Ellida's existence in *The Lady from the Sea* is equally overcast by a thick cloud of gloom, which hides from her the pleasures and obligations of daily life. We learn of Hedda's peculiar nature in the first act of the play when the housemaid Berte tells Juliane Tesman (Jorgen Tesman's aunt) of her apprehension: "I'm really afraid I'll never manage to suit the young mistress" (Ibsen 264). Hedda's cultivated, exquisite nature is further revealed by Miss Tesman's reply to Berte: "You can understand that, can't you, with General Gabler's daughter? Think what she was accustomed to in the General's day. Do you remember her riding along the road with her father? In that long black habit? And feathers in her hat?" (Ibsen 265). Also, the initial picture of Ellida in *The Lady from the Sea* is given that of a dying "mermaid" as she calls herself. She cannot be happy or make others happy, because she has been pulled out from her natural abode, the sea. She is shown as a mermaid dying in a sultry cave "strayed from the open sea, and now she cannot find her way back. And the water is brackish, you see, so here she lies—dying" (Ibsen 236). Dr. Wangel picturesquely declares, "It was really a crime against Ellida to take her from out there and bring her here" (Ibsen 298), as Ellida cannot acclimatize to the new environment.

Both Hedda and Ellida were accustomed to an independent and adventurous life in the past but at present life offer them nothing of that sort. Leading a bored and aimless life Hedda and Ellida have developed internal conflicts, because the suffocating environment of the Tesman's house and the sluggish water of the fjord offer them no beauty and fascination for self-fulfillment. It is observed that in both plays Ibsen shows the inner pressures and conflicts that inhibit and even destroy an individual.

Hedda's suffering from inner pressures and her uneasiness in Tesman's house is further confirmed by her first appearance in Act One, She says, "Yes, we certainly need fresh air in here" (Ibsen 273). She has developed an ambivalent nature; first, she dislikes the open door and then yearns for the fresh air. Showing resentment for either environment points to Hedda's neuropathic state in the Tesmans' bourgeois family. Similarly, Ellida's irresistible longing for the sea and her mental anguish can be observed in Act One from her answer to Dr. Wangel's question about the water in the fjord: "Fresh? Good heavens, the water's never fresh here—it's dull and tepid. Ugh, here in the fjords the water's sluggish" (Ibsen 245). Ellida's protest suggests her condition; internally shaking with perpetual unrest, and her emotional longing for the lively open sea water. She is a nature torn away from its abode, made sluggish by the fjord water, and consequently suffers from extreme violent disturbances. Both terrible fascination with the sea hides from her the pleasures and obligations of daily life Her worth is entirely swamped in nervous fancies, in dreams of a passionate and altogether shadowy existence.

She married Tesman just to conform to society's expectations, but in her heart, she's still Hedda Gabler.

Ellida Wangel in the same way is extremely discontent with her present situation and for her unhappiness, she blames herself no less than her husband. She is convinced that her marriage is no more than a commercial bargain:

ELLIDA: Because the truth—quite purely and simply—is that you came out there and—and bought me.

WANGEL: Bought . . . ! You say 'bought'?

ELLIDA: Oh, I was every bit as bad as you. I agreed to the deal—I sold myself to you. (Ibsen 304)

Ellida's marriage is not the result of her love for Dr. Wangel but it was a compromise, the capitulation of her free will, a deal that she may be provided for the rest of her life, which she extremely regrets:

For the last three years, since the death of their child, they have been living like strangers to one another and not as husband and wife. "I see that our life together is not a true marriage." says Ellida, "Nor was it before—never. Not from the very first" (Ibsen 305). Her constrained and aimless existence is intolerable anymore. She rebuffs Dr. Wangel's desire for a "perfect trust, and a proper life together" by saying, "Oh, if only we could. But that's so utterly impossible" (Ibsen 263).

2. Past Affairs: Aimless Existence

Complications unfold when we learn that Hedda has had an earlier love association with Lovborg.

She had felt strangely drawn to a sailor who had known and loved her years earlier. Unlike Hedda, no fears of public scandal are found in her character since she conceals nothing about her past and enlightens Dr. Wangel about how she came under the spell of that man. That man has had extraordinary power over her and mostly talked with her about the sea. Since then she cannot throw off that mysterious power he has over her mind. He is a kind of a demon lover, a creature of the sea, and a sort of impersonation of the waves. She does not hide anything from her husband and explicitly confesses all this to him, "I mean this terrible thing . . . this inexplicable power that he has over my mind" (Ibsen 271). This hints at her mental illness and extreme neurotic state being entrapped by her past life. "Ellida is ill—is, indeed, in a state bordering on hysteria—" Janet Garton accordingly points out, "because she is repressing the part of herself. Her dreams of a Stranger are a fantastical embodiment of what is excluded from her life with the family" (117). Dr. Wangel also realizes her extreme psychopathic condition and fevered fantasy:

WANGEL: Good lord—you're more ill than I thought. More ill than even you realize, Ellida.

ELLIDA: Yes, yes. Help me if you can. I can feel it closing in on me—nearer and nearer. (Ibsen 273)

Her mysterious illness is the reason of her love for the sea. This character of the sea is externalized in her former lover, the Stranger, who exercises such hypnotic power over her. She exclaims that their dead "child's eyes changed colour with the sea" and "the child had the stranger's eyes" (Ibsen 273-74). This reflects Ellida's ambivalent mental disorders that undermine her personal and familial stability. She in extremely emotional state, "[*desperately beating her head with her hands*]" addresses Dr. Wangel, "Now you can see why I can never—why I dare not—live with you again as your wife" (Ibsen 274). Her psychological longings for the sea debarred her to develop affectionate relations with her husband and the two stepdaughters. She is living in Wangel's house as a stranger with a purposeless existence and no responsibility.

Mrs. Elvsted is willing to sacrifice her reputation in her love for Lovborg, leaving behind a loveless, joyless marriage. Society might condemn her for betraying her duty and responsibility, but she does not care for that. In following Lovborg to the town, she is heedless of imminent scandal, breaking the social limitations because "not only has Thea dared to defy conventional society, but has also reclaimed Ejlert from alcoholism and

inspired him to write a brilliant book that will make him George's competitor" (Hochman 13).

She seems to be incredibly lonely and perhaps lost emotionally, for she doesn't have the correct outlets for her emotions. As pointed out by John Northam, "not merely her intellect but her secret recesses of being have been invaded by the social conditioning she has been subjected to" (181). She is extremely unhappy and many a time says or does something in thoughtlessness as she admits to Brack why she abused Aunt Julle for throwing her hat on the sofa:

HEDDA: [*nervously, walking across the room*]. Well. You know, that kind of thing comes over me—just like that. And then I can't stop myself. I don't know, myself, how to explain it.

BRACK: You're not really happy. That's the trouble.

HEDDA: And I don't know why I should be—happy. (Ibsen 305)

Ellida in the same way mourns over her aimless existence in Wangel's household. Having no genial connection with the family, renouncing the Wangles is the only option left with her. She is going to succumb to the power of the Stranger and go with him back to sea, as to get rid of her meaningless and rootless existence:

I have nothing whatever to hinder me; here at home, there is nothing in the world to hold me. Oh, Wangel, I have no roots whatever in your house. The children don't belong to me—not in their hearts, I mean—they never have done. When I go away—if I do go—whether it's with him tonight, or out to Skjoldvik tomorrow—I'll not have a single key to hand over, no orders to give about anything at all. I'm so utterly without roots in your house. Even from the very beginning, I've been like a complete outsider here. (Ibsen 314)

Ellida's protest delineates the emptiness of life. Neither the Wangles nor the sluggish water in the fjord could provide her with the association and freedom of mind that she needed most. "Because now there's nothing to hold me," she in desperation complains to Dr. Wangel, "nothing to help me, nothing to give me strength. I have no ties with what should have been our precious possession" (Ibsen 314). The day she was torn out from the sea, her life became that of an alien a dying 'mermaid' on the dry land. She lost freedom, free will and self-worth when she married Dr. Wangel and got into the stifling environment of the fjord. "You call it my own life! No, my own life—my *true* life—went astray when I joined it to yours. [*Wringing her hands in pain and agitation*]" (Ibsen 314) she repentantly says. About the Stranger, Ellida says, "[h]e's coming to offer me my last and only chance to live my own true life. It's with him that I feel I belong"; (Ibsen 314) yet she claims that what is threatening her is 'no force from outside.' Highlighting this ambivalent nature of Ellida, Harold Clurman observes, "[t]hough she wholly respects and is genuinely fond of her husband, the thought of the man of the sea to whom she considered herself betrothed haunts her" (152). What emerges from this discussion as the root cause of Ellida's unhappiness is the fact that she feels robbed of her essential freedom as a human being.

3. Recourse to Violence

Though Ellida overtly expresses the causes of her extreme anxiety but Hedda is unable to do so. The fear of public scandal constrains her to explain the reasons of her anguish but when she is mentally overwhelmed by the circumstances of her life, she resorts to violence and shooting pistols she has inherited from her father. According to Harold Bloom, "Hedda's father's pistols symbolize her repressed self, and her propensity for firing them into the air is a picture of the aimlessness of her existence" (15). She cannot retain her past adventurous life, and as a result of her present aimless existence she becomes neurotic and in extreme emotional states recurs to deviant behavior. Her shooting of General Gabler pistols hints to her deviant maladaptive behaviour that she will never be psychologically adjusted to the Tesman's morbid family life. Stanley Hochman notes: "Hedda Gabler's pistols successively become her frustration, her thwarted aggression, her attachment to her father, her masculine strain, her explosive irrationality, her eventual destructiveness, and the sinister emblems of an entire functionless, bored, doomed society" (4).

"Hedda has ideals, which are in every respect the reverse of the standards by which she now seems obliged to live" (May 81).

She also has no taste for things or persons that claim her freedom. Replying to a question by Judge Brack, she rejects all those things that make claims about her personality, "I have no gift for that kind of thing, Mr. Brack. Not for things that make claim on me! . . . Oh, be quiet, I tell you! It often seems to me that I've only got a gift for one thing in the world. . . . For boring myself to death. Now you know" (306-7).

On the contrary, in the character of Ellida, no traits of violence are observed although she has been going through a life of extreme emotional disturbance. The reason for her illness is her irresistible longing for the sea. When she is emotionally overwhelmed by her existence she does not recourse to violence but gets into the sea water to soothe herself. “She is not exactly ill,” Dr. Wangel tells Arnholm “but her nerves have been very bad—on and off, that are—these last few years. I really don’t know what to make of it. But do you know, once she gets into the sea she’s perfectly well and happy” (Ibsen 244).

Unlike Jorgen Tesman Dr. Wangel for obvious reasons, is a shrewd man and not oblivious to his wife’s condition and emotional inclinations. He understands that the dimension for which she yearns finds its correlative in the sea. It is not some external force, but the strain of her mind, the deep impulses of her psyche that are taking her away from him.

ELLIDA: But there’s my *mind*—all my thoughts and longings and desires—you have no hold over *them*. They will reach out and yearn for the unknown that I was created for, and that you have kept me from!

WANGEL: I realize that, Ellida. Step by step you’re slipping away from me. Your longing for the boundless and the infinite—for the unattainable—will, in the end, carry your soul out into the darkness.

ELLIDA: Yes, yes, I can feel it—like black soundless wings hovering over me.

(Ibsen 327)

It is because of Dr. Wangel’s open discussion with Ellida, the understanding of her psyche, and his affectionate behaviour that she does not recourse to violent actions as done by Hedda Gabler.

Besides, Hedda needs a purpose in life because so far she has no control over her life and therefore no purpose. She seeks to fill the void of her being through the control of the lives of others. In moments of self-revelation, she gives expression to the connection between her desire to control and her poverty of being in similar terms:

HEDDA: . . . I want, for once in my life, to have power over a human being’s fate.

MRS ELVSTED: But haven’t you got that?

HEDDA: I have not. I never have had.

MRS ELVSTED: Not over your husband’s?

HEDDA: That *would* be worth having wouldn’t it? Ah, if you could only realize how poor I am. And here are you, offered such riches! I think I shall burn your hair off, after all.

MRS. ELVSTED: Let go! Let go! I’m frightened of you Hedda! (Ibsen 314)

Hedda’s manifest act of deviant behaviour hints at her psychological frustration and inferiority to Mrs. Elvsted; for having hair strikingly blonde, unusually rich and wavy. Her violent jealousy and contempt for Mrs. Elvsted’s beautiful hair reflect Hedda’s unconscious inferiority complex. The inner poverty of which she speaks to Mrs. Elvsted is highlighted by the fact that the pistols and the old piano are indeed the only inanimate objects, with which she has a positive relationship. Due to her psychological disproportion, she is unable to develop any positive relationships with human beings. Her complex feelings about the relationship between Mrs. Elvsted and Lovborg further reveal her psychological sufferings. It is her apparent belief that Lovborg should be liberated from the constraints of his relationship with Mrs. Elvsted, and she so ruthlessly works upon him that he goes to a bachelor party given by Judge Brack and gets drunk once again. She pretends to be Mrs. Elvsted’s friend but undermines her sources of happiness by corrupting Lovborg, encouraging his thoughts of suicide, putting into his hands one of her father’s pistols, and burning their book (their love child).

Hedda doesn’t offer any reasons why she does these things, though she expresses the desire to alter someone’s destiny, perhaps to bring herself inner satisfaction. When the manuscript comes into Hedda’s possession, through Tesman, who found it by the roadside, she burns it saying:

[*Throwing some of the leaves into the fire and whispering to herself*]. Now I am burning your child, Thea. You, with your curly hair. [*Throwing a few more leaves into the stove.*] Your child and Ejlert Lovborg’s. [*Throwing in the rest.*] I’m burning it—burning your child. (Ibsen 345)

The annihilating hatred which is dramatized in this scene is directed as much against the self as against Thea’s relations with Lovborg. Hedda herself is pregnant and giving birth to the unwanted child in the suffocating Tesmans’ environment may appear a dreadful idea to her. So the burning of the book is a kind of self destruction that a mother-to-be is burning a child. Karl Menninger observes that the causes of self destruction may be aptly applied to Hedda’s character that “man carries inward forces of destruction which work first inward and then outward to bring about ultimate destruction to self and to others” (4-6). Hedda may be jealous of Thea but her motive in burning the manuscript is more complex than that. The state of mind that Thea

somehow manages to share with the brilliant and unpredictable Lovborg is a cause of offence to Hedda's being. Commenting on her extreme desperation and acts of violence Durbah writes:

Trapped in the world of begetting and dying, incarcerated in her own Gableism and again within the confines of the bourgeois parlour, Hedda's desperate need to break free of her repressions and her human limitations finds expression in acts of violence and fantasies of destruction. (41)

She realizes that Brack now has control over her and is trying to establish sexual relations with her for keeping silence in the matter. The situation is unbearable for the kind of Hedda who has ever tried to have control over others; she, in extreme desperation, looks at Judge Brack and says:

So I am in your power, Mr. Brack. From now on, you have a hold over me. . . . In your power, all the same. At the mercy of your will and demands. And so a slave! A slave! No! That thought I cannot tolerate. Never! (Ibsen 362)

Despite her attempts to manipulate and control those around her, she now is manipulated and is in control of Judge Brack. Thus Hedda is faced with extreme psychological pressures, entrapped in a loveless marriage and finds no purpose and responsibility in life. The

[tries to escape but cannot; she stands as if paralyzed with terror, supporting herself on a tree-stump by the pond]: Don't touch me. Don't come near me—stay where you are. Don't touch me I say! . . . *[running to him, she clings tightly to his arm and cries]* Oh, Wangel, save me—save me if you can! (Ibsen 284)

The character of the Stranger is the manifestation of the sea for Ellida, who exercises hypnotic power over her mind. The situation becomes more agonizing for her and asks desperately for Wangel's help:

ELLIDA *[softly, trembling]*: Oh, Wangel—save me from myself!

WANGEL: Ellida . . . I think—you're keeping something from me.

ELLIDA: Yes . . . the fascination . . .

WANGEL: Fascination?

ELLIDA: That man is like the sea. (289-90)

Ellida unconsciously belongs to the Stranger, instinctively drawn to him and asks Wangel for permission to leave his house. The greatest impression on her mind is the Stranger's assertion that "she must come of her own free will" (Ibsen 286). And now she voices strongly for her complete freedom of choice, which Hedda could not dare to do, and warns Wangel if he failed to do so the consequences would be disastrous:

My dear, you don't understand me at all. . . . What I want is that you and I should release each other of our own free wills. . . . The most important thing, Wangel, is that you should do as I beg and implore you—simply set me free . . . give me back my complete freedom. . . . I want to be completely free when I meet him. (Ibsen 306-07)

Hence, Ellida in the end is in extreme psychological distress and is in a dilemma of choice. The soundless wings of black darkness are hovering over her mind and tightening their grip on her heart. This hints to her acute mental anguish that she might lose her sanity or commit suicide to which she refers to soundless wings of black darkness. "There's no force from outside that's threatening me." She enlightens Wangel, "The terrible thing lies deeper, Wangel . . . it is the terrible fascination within my own mind—and what can you do against it?" (Ibsen 308). Dr. Wangel studying Ellida's symptoms of psychosis does not impose his authority upon her and gives her full freedom of choice. Seeing through her neuropathic state, he cures her shrewdly by heightening her sense of responsibility.

WANGEL: . . . But now—now you are completely free from me and mine. Now your own innermost life can take its true path again, because now your choice is free—and the responsibility is yours, Ellida.

ELLIDA: Free—and with full responsibility! Oh, that changes everything! (Ibsen 327-28)

Wangel wisely gives her the freedom of choice with responsibility, either to stay or to follow the Stranger to whom she feels herself bound by a previous vow. David Thomas remarks about Dr. Wangel's act: "In relinquishing any claim to have authority, he gives her incontrovertible proof of his affection for her" (86). The instant Ellida assumes her freedom of choice and action, and limitations are removed; she rejects the Stranger and gets rid of her pursuer. No longer is she overshadowed by that vague yearning for the sea, but takes her stand in solid reality. She bluntly addresses the Stranger: "I can never go with you . . . Your will hasn't the slightest power over me any more. To me you are a dead man—who has come from the sea, and will return to it. You hold no terror for me any more—nor any fascination" (Ibsen 328).

What sways her is not merely freedom, but her gradual realization that Wangel and his daughters love her and

need her so that there is a purpose for her. “The moment she feels herself a free and responsible woman,” G. B. Shaw observes, “all her childish fancies vanish: the seaman becomes simply an old acquaintance whom she no longer cares for; and the doctor’s affection produces its natural effect” (107). Ellida now has a purpose and duty in life, which Hedda unfortunately cannot find and in desperation brings an end to her aimless existence. For having all limitations wiped out, and assuming a purpose in life; Ellida unlike Ibsen’s other protagonists is the only character that evades the ultimate catastrophe at the end. Thus the message of both the plays *Hedda Gabler* and *The Lady from the Sea* can be summarized that human beings can acclimatize themselves psychologically, provided they are free and have purpose in life with full responsibility.

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